



Organic Clausewitz

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Introduction by Lucas Winter

In this essay, Mika Kerttunen from the National Defence University, Finland, argues that an “organic” interpretation of Clausewitz can help guide us through the minefield of “postmodern” warfare. A proper reading of Clausewitz, he explains, requires an understanding of his “ontological starting points.” For Clausewitz, the essence of war was captured in the *Wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit* (“Fascinating Trinity”), a dynamic triangle made up of three interacting elements (hatred-violence/chance-unpredictability/rationality-instrumentality) whose internal relationships produce different varieties of warfare. The erroneous identification of the triangle’s three elements/forces with specific actors (people/commander/government), Kerttunen notes, is one of the reasons Clausewitz appears ill-suited to explain contemporary wars.

When properly understood, Clausewitz has much to contribute to the current era. A contemporary reading should prioritize dynamic relationships over hierarchical categories. Hierarchies still matter, but the interactive organic interpretation is most relevant to the current operational environment. As Kerttunen explains: “The drama of war – hatred, chance and rationality – is performed by several actors in numerous battles outside of the institutional theatre of war. The differentiated levels of strategy, war and battle may bring some administrative clarity but are neither conceptually nor intellectually necessary.”

Kerttunen argues for a broad understanding of war as “organized social, violent and intentional fighting over values” that permeates social action, an activity that takes place at the level of high politics but also of “local and petty politics.” He emphasizes the political nature of any social action and conflict, with the position that politics and political systems allocate a broad range of values including resources. When applied to the contemporary operational environment, the organic interpretation inevitably invites us to reconsider many of our basic assumptions; in the author’s words: “We also need to radically question our established and occasionally problematic ways of reading, understanding and ‘doing strategy,’ of waging war and of fighting in battle.”

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*Clausewitz is most often associated with states and conventional, modern ways of war. Rightly or wrongly, the ghosts of Austerlitz, Verdun, and Berlin stain the pages of *On War*. Those of us who believe times have changed, though, should revisit, reread, and even reinterpret Clausewitz. We do not need to be or become guardians of Clausewitzian purity; rather, and as this paper tries to do, we can revisit some of his theoretical insights and apply them to our current perceptions and practices of war and strategy.*

The difficulty of reading and understanding *On War* is commonly acknowledged. Concepts such as “war” and “the center of gravity,” along with the dualistic and skeptical methodology of Carl von Clausewitz, leave room for a variety of interpretations. Clausewitz is regularly attacked, defended, and reinterpreted. Readers of *On War* expound it in either its absolute form or a form based on relativism.

The absolute reading of Clausewitz takes his text as given. The treatise is seen, if not as a cookbook, then at least as providing universal and lasting guidance.¹ Critics using this approach also take the text as it is, but see it as old-fashioned and even dangerous.² Relativists, on the other hand, contextualize their interpretations of Clausewitz. Some historians, for instance, remind us that Clausewitz was often neither the first nor the best student of war and warfare, that there were



and are other “prophets” too.³ Many situate *On War* in the contexts of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.⁴ Clausewitz is also found to be sociologically oriented and essential.⁵

It is rather surprising that in defending, attacking, situating, or reinterpreting Clausewitz, few pay attention to his theoretical claims and assumptions, especially his ontological starting points and argumentation. The lack of interest in questions of being is surprising, given that the main issue he investigates, what war is made of, is essentially ontological.⁶

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Nature of Political War

It takes at least two to wage war. Defining war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will”⁷ reveals three essential tenets in Clausewitz’s thinking: the inherently violent nature of war, the interaction of two opposing wills, and the instrumental role of violence (and war).

Violence and
the Government
hated; change
and probability
[Commander]

This approach is further developed and explicitly expressed in his *wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit* (“fascinating Trinity”), which not only introduces the three central elements of war, but also lays out an ontological and critical framework to approach war. The fascinating Trinity alone explains the composition and nature of

war. Clausewitz links the forces of violence and hatred; change and probability; and subordinate and instrumental nature to the people, the commander, and the government, respectively.⁸ The problem with this is that it turns absolute to relative and simplified, leading those who focus only on the actors to lose the critical tension and dynamism embedded in the Trinity. It is about the elements, not the actors!

Criticism of this Clausewitzian framework and understanding of war intensified after the Cold War. The nature of war, it was thought, had been transformed by increasing intrastate and micro-level violence, new non- and anti-state actors, and the decline in interstate war. John Keegan

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claims that Clausewitz’s idea of war as continuation of policy “implies the existence of states” and their interests. Keegan is fascinated by the notion of culture, which, for him, replaces politics. War is thus always an expression of culture, even “in some societies the culture itself.”⁹ Martin van Creveld attaches himself to the actor-based triangle framework and considers Clausewitz outdated. Van Creveld lists a number of “non-political wars” where justice, religion or existence has replaced politics as the rationale for war.¹⁰ For Antulio Echevarria, who has also observed the changing colors of war, Clausewitz’s Trinity is still relevant. When speaking about a “war of ideas,” Echevarria recognizes the purposes, “political, social, or economic in nature,” as well as the possibility of violence and hostilities in such wars.¹¹

The idea of non-political war is absurd. It is based on a limited understanding of politics, as if one could enter and leave the political realm rather than constantly being embedded in it. The notion of “the political” should not be restricted to political systems, governments or states. Instead, it includes all aspects of social activity, given that it first and foremost addresses the Lasswellian question of who gets what, when and how.¹² Power relations and decision making within a family, tribe or church are political in this sense. Cultural forms and aspects, even ritual-based violence, serve not only “the cultural,” but are also mechanisms for maintaining social cohesion and power structures, nurturing tradition and telling stories about good and bad, right and wrong, us and them. There is no need for a particular form, procedure or organization either; these are, in fact, secondary elements, derived from the primary dynamics of the political. Although Clausewitz did not explicitly elaborate on the relationship between war and politics, and while his conception of politics may be seen as narrow, his view on the political and instrumental nature of war is not limited to any particular form of state, government or other political actor.

One should not understand the Trinity as a rigid triangle, but rather a framework that is structured yet flexible, where the three elements interact with each other. The question of what animates and produces change within the Trinity is essential and helps us understand the objective and subjective natures of war. The strength and location of each element within the Trinity can be understood in accordance with its internal changes. The elements are mobile. The objectives and purposes of war vary, as do the means and intensity employed; degree of hatred and enmity

invoked; and targets involved.¹³ War cannot be understood as any single element of this Trinity.

The key concept is that internal and relative changes in the Trinity's elements, i.e., the subjective nature and relative character of war, do not fundamentally alter the structure, the objective, and the absolute nature of war.¹⁴ For example, political and societal development plus technological innovations may affect why and how war is conceived and then fought. These inputs and the resulting outcomes change the practices and perceptions that make up these various elements, but they do not alter the structure itself.

Neither should one focus on any single particular aspect, actor or factor, but instead heed Clausewitz's advice that "we must [in war] begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together."¹⁵ Henri Bergson's distinction between de jure and de facto observables, the difference between the pure-abstract and the concrete-empirical, is another useful tool to understand and interpret Clausewitz.

It is not surprising that Clausewitz is considered outdated when abstract but real forces are replaced by changing and separated attributes. This situation exists, for instance, when the element of subordination as an instrument of policy is forgotten, while governments and states seem to have a secondary role to play. Another example is when today's decision-makers who favor surgical strikes -- in hope of short and bloodless crisis management operations -- fail to acknowledge the element of chance and probability/improbability, as well as the possibility of violence.

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The Part and the Whole Together

“War is more than a mere chameleon;” despite the changes, the superstructure seems to remain. Answers to questions of violence levels, unpredictability and instrumentality can guide political and military decision makers through the Scylla and Charybdis of war. The difficult relationship among strategy, war, and battle also needs to be taken into consideration. The study of war should not be reduced to studies of security, strategy or policy, as this neglects the moral, mental, and psychological issues of war.¹⁶ Our attitudes to war as an object or framework of study, as well as the ontology and methodology we follow, all have practical policy implications.

Clausewitz informs us that strategy is the use of engagements for the purpose or object of war. Simultaneously, he distinguishes strategy from tactics. This has led to a foundational and hierarchical way of viewing strategy, war, and battle. In this polis – to borrow the notion of a coded, striated, and institutionalized space from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari – the relationship is hierarchical and the state is the organizing and restricting power. War is the continuation of politics. The established practices of Western nation-states of the early and mid-20th century cemented this framework. This hierarchical positioning privileges appearance over essence, leading, as Adam Eikus has pointed out, to the practical problem of mistaking strategy for policy.¹⁷

An alternative reading is, however, possible. Abandoning the level-based approach frees us from getting bogged down in appearances by focusing on the essence. Following Clausewitz, we may understand strategy as an internal and intellectual enterprise, *Die Lehre*. We can thus follow Clausewitz in treating battle, war, and strategy not as separable sectors but organic aspects of one particular social phenomenon.

War is therefore not only an institution or legally defined condition, but also a phenomenon with particular tendencies that takes place in battle; strategy, accordingly, is an approach taken to survive and prevail in war. Strategy feeds back into war. Whereas in the above-outlined polis the relationship was theoretical and solid, in this smooth space it is problematic and fluid.¹⁸ Struc-

tural/hierarchical and synthetic/organic interpretations are complementary rather than competing: one need not adhere to either one of them, but instead accept the possibility of multiple truths. The organic reading is, however, often more commensurable with the current security environment than the hierarchical one. The drama of war – hatred, chance, and rationality – is performed by several actors in numerous battles outside of the institutional theater of war. The differentiated levels of strategy, war and battle may bring some administrative clarity, but are neither conceptually nor intellectually necessary.

Reinventing War

Understanding war as both a duel and a continuation of politics is appropriate. Despite the fact that Clausewitz mainly analyzed Prussian and Napoleonic wars, our reading and understanding of war should not be limited to those conditions. There are more than two parties in many wars, and the notion of politics is misleadingly and too often attached only to foreign or security policy and to states or alliances. War is not only the continuation of high politics, but also of local and petty politics. Politics is an aspect more than it is a level. The maxim is narrow because it implies a unidirectional channel of orders and influence, from the towers of politics to the abyss of war. The relativity in Clausewitz, that total destruction is not needed or that war and waging war changes politics, remains unobserved too easily and sometimes intentionally.

It is common to understand war as an institution and instrument, but it should also be viewed as an internal phenomenon with its objective Natur (nature) and subjective *Gesamterscheinung* (appearance). Emphasizing the social nature of war, we can argue that war is ontologically and essentially *organized social, violent and intentional fighting over values*¹⁹. Understanding war as an essentially social activity ties the concept to social ideas, ideologies and socially organized groups, rather than to one angry or two dueling individuals. The social aspect of war is not alien to Clausewitz either. “Social conditions of the states themselves,” he writes, are the “forces that give rise to war” and “circumscribe and moderate it.”²⁰ War is not debate or a forum for discussion, although deployments, operations, and violence can be interpreted as extensions of communication. Large-scale social violence resembles this definition of the essence of war. Social unrest and violence, however, do not have the same level of organization and intentionality, the calculative and instrumental nature of war.

“That war is violent should be obvious to everyone, before and after reading *On War*, and should not be forgotten by our politicians, officers or people.”

Social elements linked to actual human beings, such as passion and hatred, separate real war from abstract war. If we, as many in Europe and the East, regard and criticize American and Western ways of war and strategy as overfascinated with speed, acceleration and technology, a slower, social but still lethal reading of war might help us avoid or overcome impasses such as Afghanistan or South Lebanon.²¹

Considering war as being essentially intentional and waged over values constitutes approval, but not a normative standpoint. War is for something and for someone. Someone benefits or at least hopes to benefit from war despite, or because of, its destructiveness and transformative power. This definition of the essence of war does not link war to any specific form, actor or attribute.²² That war is violent should be obvious to everyone, before and after reading *On War*, and should not be forgotten by our politicians, officers or people.

Understanding and managing postmodern wars and conflicts requires that we – in a Clausewitzian manner – acknowledge both the social and political nature and the holistic ontology of war. We also need to radically question our established and occasionally problematic ways of reading, understanding and “doing strategy,” of waging war and of fighting in battle.

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Image Sources

- 1 Painting of Carl von Clausewitz.
Source: <http://www.nodulo.org/ec/2007/n066p13.htm>
- 2 Painting by Adolf Northen of Prussian troops storm the village of Plancenoit during the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon's final defeat on June 18, 1815.
Source: <http://www.lessingimages.com/viewimage.asp?i=26030464+&cr=1&cl=1>